

The Erie Canal's Western Terminus–

Commercial Slip, Harbor Development and Canal District



Buffalo Inner Harbor, (c. 1900s)

BUFFALO, NEW YORK

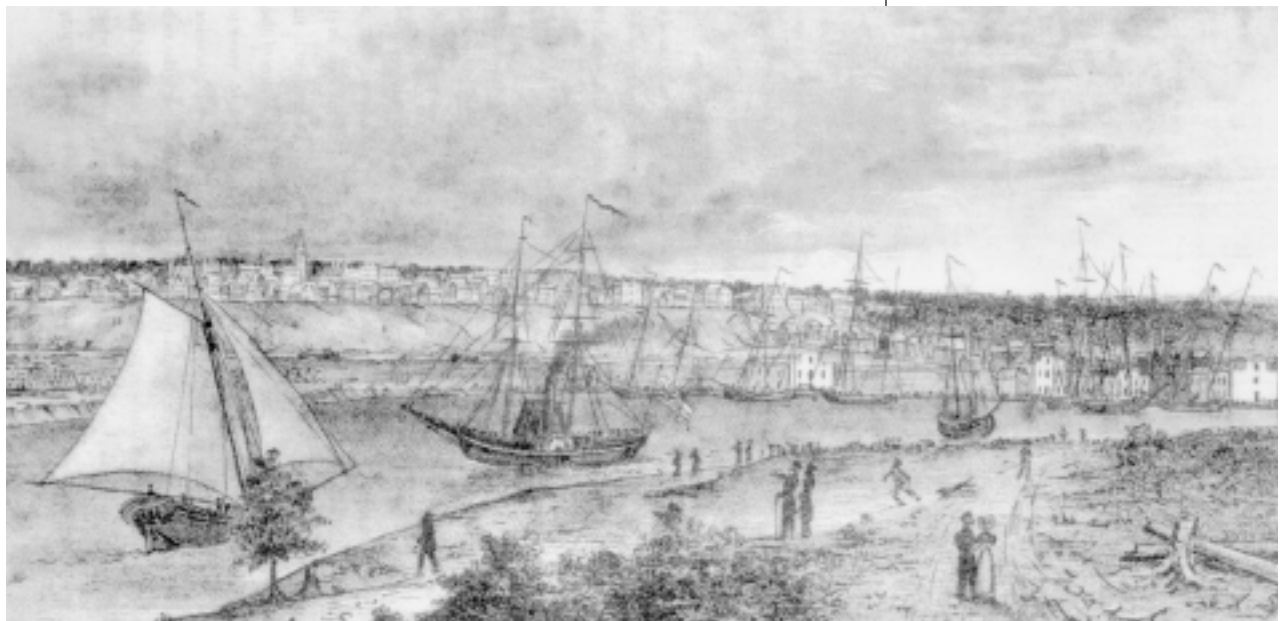
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Introduction – Big and Little Buffalo Creeks

Although evidence of sporadic human activity and occupancy can be traced back to 1,000 or more BC and the first Europeans on the scene were French explorers and missionaries in the 1600's, Buffalo, New York really began in the 1790's when the first permanent pioneers set down roots here. The main portion of the settlement eventually clustered upon "The Terrace", a sand bluff (probably a beach deposit from a higher lake level near the end of the ice age) perched some 25 feet or more above the level of Lake Erie but not a great distance inland (east) of its then glistening shoreline (Figure 1). From the terrace, early settlers enjoyed splendid panoramic views of the lake and Big Buffalo Creek, the vista splendidly amplified by the magnificent sunsets of summer. Maybe there is something to the legend that Buffalo got its name from the French *beau fleuve* for beautiful river.

Figure 1, Buffalo in 1825, looking northeast from the mouth of Big Buffalo Creek. The Terrace is just beyond the creek, with Village of Buffalo perched on top, cluster of buildings at far right marks the entrance to Commercial Slip (from: Cadwallader D. Colden, 1825, *Memoir at the Celebration of the Completion of the New York Canals*, facing page 293)



Between the terrace, the lake, and the creek lay a nearly flat lowland of swamps and bogs interspersed with clusters of low bushes, shrubs and alders, appropriately termed The Flats. In this most unlikely setting, subject to frequent flooding when the lake was driven hard ashore by strong westerly winds, a startling transformation would take place propelled by the coming of the Erie Canal in 1825 - the birth of a splendid city - the Queen City of the Great Lakes. Here on the flats below the terrace the seeds of other great cities such as Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago were sown because throngs of people brought to this place on the Erie Canal would transfer to lake

vessels to populate the Midwest. The Flats may indeed have witnessed the birth of a nation and in the process the name *The Flats* quickly gave way to more unseemly terms such as the *Canal District* or the *Infected District* or worse yet the *Infested District*.

But before the coming of the Erie Canal, a small tributary stream to Big Buffalo Creek sluggishly snaked its way west across the flats parallel to and at the base of the terrace, its path in fact determined and controlled by the geographic orientation of the bluff. It was called Little Buffalo Creek and its murky waters merged with those of Big Buffalo Creek a short distance upstream of Big Buffalo Creek's mouth at Lake Erie (Figure 2). However about 800 feet east of the confluence of the two streams, where the old Memorial Auditorium ("The Aud") is located today, Little Buffalo Creek elbowed sharply 90° south and after a final, gently curving, loop east united seamlessly with its larger neighbor. This short, final stretch of Little Buffalo Creek, several hundred feet long, would one day morph into Commercial Slip, the original terminus of Clinton's Ditch (Figures 3 and 4). Little Buffalo Creek eventually would disappear, its channel straightened and canalized in 1852 to become the Main and Hamburg Canal. In 1901 it was completely filled in. The Hamburg Drain, a storm overflow and sanitary sewer was laid in the bed of Commercial Slip in 1927, bringing to a final and unsavory end the saga of Little Buffalo Creek.

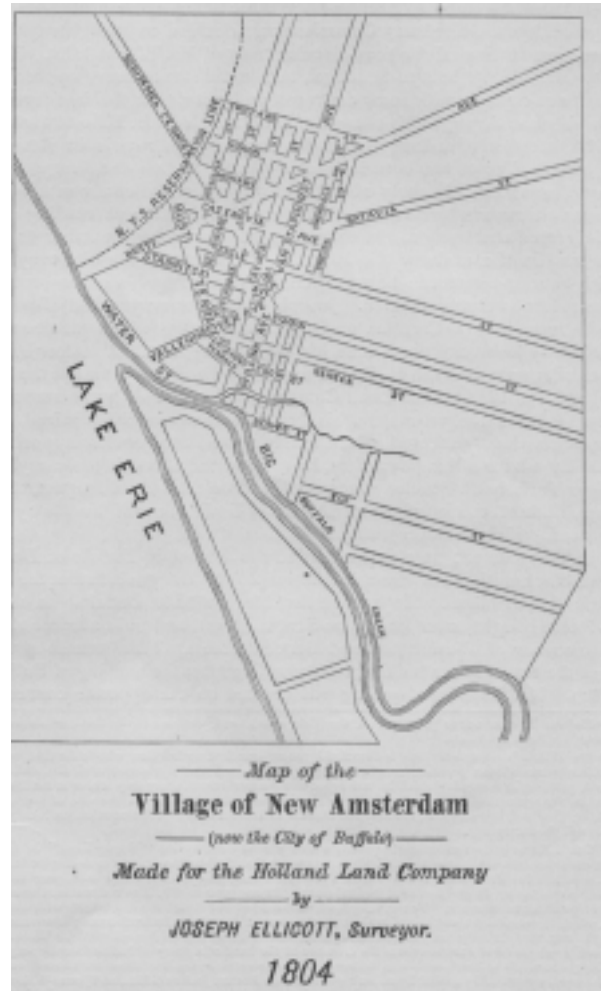


Figure 2, 1804 Map of Buffalo, Little Buffalo Creek is the tributary flowing west into Big Buffalo Creek (www.buffaloresearch.com)

Commercial Slip: Its Rise, Fall, and Resurrection

After Joseph Ellicott laid out the village of New Amsterdam in 1797 he named many of the primary streets after Dutch investors (and directors?) of the Holland Land Company and native American tribes. Early maps show street names such as Vollenhoven and Willink Avenues the two principal streets bounding the future Canal District and Seneca, Huron, and Chippewa Streets farther north (Figures 2, 3, & 4). Settlers began purchasing lots soon thereafter, most of them coming from New England. But among them was a native of France one Louis LeCouteulx and in 1803 he purchased, a lot on the east side of the main street for his business and perhaps his dwelling as well



(LeCouteulx was the village's first druggist). He purchased another four acres on the flats along Big Buffalo Creek and Water Street for raising chickens. He couldn't have known it at the time but 22 years later his chicken yard would succumb to the march of progress-the last segment of the Erie Canal would plow through it. Before too much time had elapsed, virtually all the Dutch street names, which had no great appeal to the early Yankee settlers, were changed-- Vollenhoven Avenue became Erie Street and Willink and Vanstaphorst Streets became Main Street. However of even greater importance - New Amsterdam became Buffalo.

By the War of 1812 the village had grown to well over 100 homes and other buildings. This early growth was not destined to continue. On 30 December 1813, the British rowed across the Niagara River, and nearly reduced the village to ashes. Not content to leave things as they were the Brits decided to celebrate New Year's Day in Buffalo by completing what they had begun mere days earlier-the village all but disappeared. Throughout the remainder of that year and the next the early settlers and others returned to rebuild the village. Buffalo was once again optimistic about the future and growing as well, all-be-it slowly.

Figure 3. The confluence of Little Buffalo Creek with Big Buffalo Creek—note the loop eastward where the words “Little Buffalo” are written—this would become the future Commercial Slip

Figure 4, Commercial Slip in 1825 - the lowest reach of Little Buffalo Creek. Note the piers extending out into Lake Erie built by Samuel Wilkeson and original outlet of Big Buffalo Creek- the hooked bay at southwest tip of Vollenhoven Ave., now Erie St.

The state's Erie Canal era began in 1817 and with it came new excitement for the potential economic benefits that would come to the site chosen for the western terminus of the Grand Canal. Buffalo was determined not to be second best to Black Rock in this quest, therefore a political tug-of-war soon broke out with the Village of Black Rock a short distance north on the Niagara River for the prestigious designation. But for Buffalo to be successful it needed a safe, natural, deep draft, harbor for lake vessels to dock. A sand bar at the mouth of Big Buffalo Creek which permitted only the very shallowest draft craft to pass was clearly a problem and its solution was paramount to Buffalo's quest. The obstacle had to be removed. But how?

Judge Samuel Wilkeson (1779-1848), often called the "Father of Buffalo", a freight forwarder and vessel owner, provided the brilliant answer. He thought that if there was no natural harbor one could be built by harnessing the erosive power of the spring freshets coming down Big Buffalo Creek. In the spring of 1820 a dam was constructed on the creek to raise the level of the water. Concurrently with this project two piers were sunk into the lake outward from the shore constructed of wooden cribs, filled with stone, - the south pier much longer than the north one. The longer pier extended out into the lake approximately 1,300 feet and disrupted the long shore currents thereby preventing the sand bar from re-establishing itself.

Interestingly both piers were **not** constructed as mere outward continuations of the then existing banks of Buffalo Creek but at a different compass bearing of approximately 30 degrees south relative to the old banks. The brilliant plan not only shifted the mouth of Buffalo Creek some 1,000 feet south from its original location (where the southern end of Erie Basin would one day exist), it redirected the flow of the creek at right angles to the sand bar, bringing to bear the maximum scouring force of the creek's rushing waters against it when the dam was broken (Figure 4). Samuel Wilkeson wrote in 1840 (quoted in: Vogel, M.N. et al., 1993, ***America's Crossroads Buffalo's Canal Street/Dante Place***: Heritage Press WNY Heritage Institute, Canisius College, Buffalo, NY p.15):

Thus was completed the first work of the kind ever completed on the Lakes. It had occupied two hundred and twenty-one working days in building – the laborers always rested on the Sabbath – and it extended into the lake about 80 rods, to twelve feet of water. It was begun, carried on and completed principally by three private individuals, some of whom mortgaged their whole real estate to raise the means for making an improvement in which they had but a common interest.

Buffalo was eventually chosen, happily for the citizens of Buffalo, over Black Rock for the western terminus of the Erie Canal. The location of the canal's western terminus, chosen by the engineers and the Canal Commissioners, was the point where Little Buffalo Creek emptied into Big Buffalo Creek. The banks from the confluence to 800 feet upstream on Little Buffalo Creek to the aforementioned "elbow bend" were straightened and equipped with wharves (first the north then the south side) to form Commercial Slip and the creek itself was dredged (Figure 3). Therefore the original terminus was never a direct connection to Lake Erie but an indirect one through Commercial Slip and Big Buffalo Creek (Figure 4). One possible explanation for not constructing a direct connection to the lake from the canal was thoughtful concern for exposing the canal's western terminus to the jagged fangs of gale force winds and the powerful lake surges that would directly impact this very crucial point. Adverse conditions at the point of canal and lake interface would not only have a negative impact on shipping of commodities but more importantly on ample water supply for the Erie Canal east to Montezuma. Break walls constructed later would mitigate the hazard.

August 9, 1823 construction began on the westernmost end of Clinton's Ditch on The Flats about where Erie Street crossed the canal alignment. William Hodge wrote of his recollections of the event (Ibid. p.17):

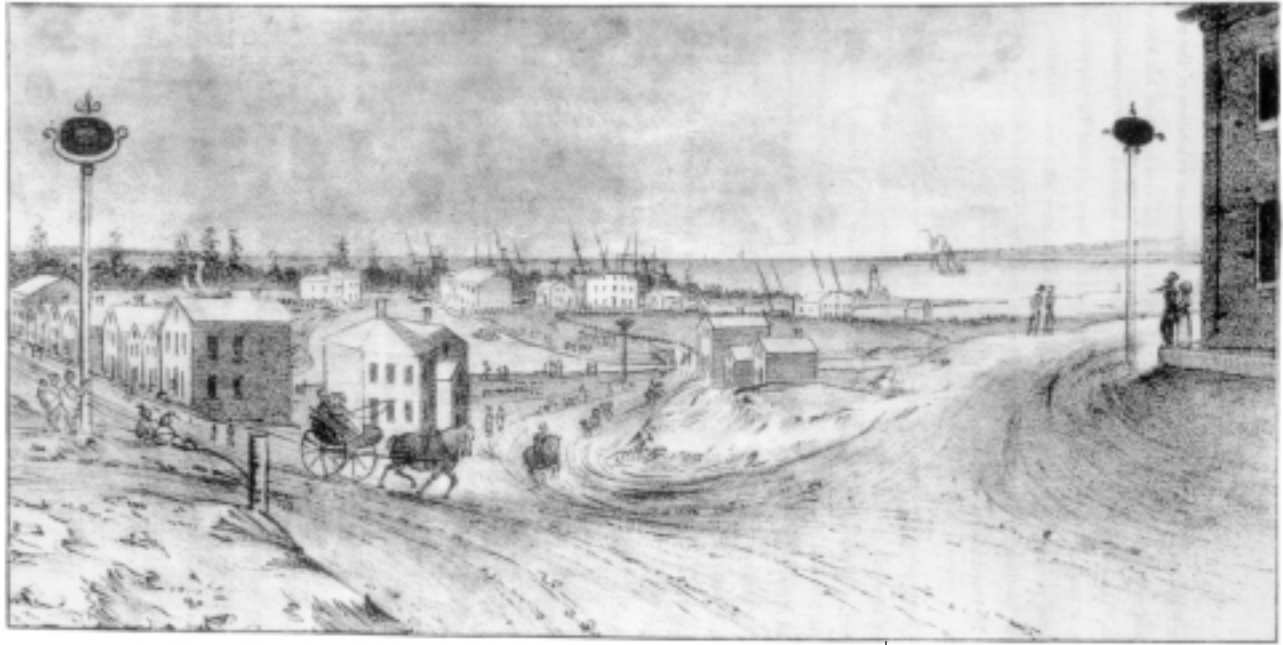
The contract for excavating the west end of the canal from Little Buffalo creek down half way to Sandytown [south of Black Rock-LaSalle Park today] was given,... Word was given out and also published in our Buffalo newspaper that on a certain day ground would be broken for Clinton's big ditch. All were invited... ..to take part in helping the great work... .. On this occasion... ..pure whiskey...was provided bountifully and in true western style. Along the line of the canal, at convenient distances, was to be found a barrel of whiskey, pure old rye, with part of the head cut out and a tin dipper lying by and all were expected to help themselves. It was free for all. It was the only refreshment furnished by those who had charge of the first canal work in the village of Buffalo... ..All took a hand in carrying earth to help make the big ditch, from the honored judge down to the schoolboy urchin.

The citizens of Buffalo were ecstatic about their accomplishment, perhaps due in no small measure to the liquid refreshment that was so liberally provided. Louis LeCouteulx may have not been the most joyous of the lot—his chicken yard was in shambles. He did not live

to see one of the streets in the infamous Canal District named after him-LeCouteux Street (LECOUTEUX on the Schillner map-Figure 5) in the northern portion of the district, the fourth street north of Commercial Slip. Even if he had lived to witness this dubious distinction, he probably would have been disgruntled none-the-less--in 1893 the street sported 7 brothels and 5 saloons (Ibid p.178).

It was from Commercial Slip on 26 October 1825 that Governor DeWitt Clinton, his family and other dignitaries boarded the canal boat **SENECA CHIEF** for the inaugural trip to New York City a journey popularly known as the “Wedding of the Waters” (Figure 6-8). On 4 November 1825 Clinton poured a keg of Lake Erie water into New York’s harbor, the wedding had been consummated.

Figure 5, Schillner Map c.1897 of Commercial Slip. The wide street crossing the Evans Ship Canal on the north is Erie Street. The notorious Canal District was the quadrant between Commercial Slip and Erie Street bounded on the west by Buffalo Creek and the east by the old Erie Canal. Note the spelling of LeCouteulx Street (pronounced Lee-Ku-Tex) *Courtesy NYS Archives*



Buffalo Harbor, and Ancillary Canals

Contemporaneous with the “fitting out” of **Commercial Slip** another one, **Prime Slip**, was constructed during the winter of 1824-1825 between Lloyd and Hanover Street east of and parallel to Commercial Slip (Figure 7) Named after Nathaniel Prime, one of the property owners, it was a private canal that never realized its potential and was filled in the 1860’s. Soon after the canal’s inauguration, important canal related structures were erected in the canal district, eventually expanding onto the Terrace, east onto Main Street and reaching north to Erie Street. The Central Warf, between Commercial Slip and Main Street and backing onto Prime Street became the leading staging area for arrival and departure of lake and canal goods in the years from 1825 to 1883.

The dramatic increase in trade in the 1830’s and 1840’s necessitated the planning and construction of new slips, basins and adjuncts to the Erie Canal and Buffalo’s vibrant harbor (Figure 9). The **Evans Ship Canal**, a private venture, on the north end of the Canal District built by the Evans Estate was excavated in 1832-1834. The 1842 Dart Elevator powered by steam was erected on this canal at its junction

Figure 6, Commercial Slip from the Terrace 1825, directly behind the building just left of center. Note curve of the slip’s south bank (between the buildings) – a relic of Little Buffalo Creek’s loop. “Wedding of the Waters” began here. (from: Cadwallader D. Colden, 1825, *Memoir at the Celebration of the Completion of the New York Canals*, facing page 295)

Figure 7, Buffalo Harbor 1834 showing Commercial Slip and adjacent Prime Slip. Evans Ship Canal left (north) and Little Buffalo Creek far right. Holms Hutchinson Survey map (*Courtesy NYS Archives*)





Figure 8, Commercial Slip c.1890
looking west to its outlet Buffalo
Creek-now restored

Figure 9, Buffalo Harbor and Canals
1900 (from *Whitford, Noble E. 1906,*
History of the Canal System of the
State of New York, facing p.588)



Basin although reconstructed in 1970-1973 exists today and the Ohio Basin was rebuilt in the Barge Canal era. It was filled in after WW II in 1953. **The City Ship Canal (Blackwell Canal)** was completed in 1850 (Figure 9) and was a significant expansion of Buffalo Harbor. It was extended periodically over the next 60 years and deepened. In 1883 the canal was extended south through the Tifft Farm to a point just north of Tifft Street where the Lehigh Valley Railroad erected ore and coal docks. The portion south of Ohio Street became inactive and was partially filled in the 1950's.

The Buffalo River (formerly Big Buffalo Creek) upstream from Commercial Slip and the City Ship Canal witnessed a major expansion of grain elevator construction after Joseph Dart's seminal achievement in 1842. Within 15 years of Dart's elevator ten new grain elevators were in operation in Buffalo's inner harbor and by the early 20th century more than 40 elevators including some cement elevators were in operation, most of these on Buffalo's waterfront (Figure 10).



Figure 10, Aerial of "Elevator Alley" in the 1970's. Ohio Street Lift Bridge in lower left corner
(www.wnyheritagepress.org)

The grain trade dropped precipitously from the 300,000,000 bushels received per year at Buffalo in the 1920's and the years following World War II. Although many complex factors were involved in the decline a few prime reasons were the completion of the Welland Ship Canal in 1932 which allowed full sized, high capacity, lake freighters to bypass Buffalo; the opening of the Saint Lawrence Seaway in 1952 which was the nail in the coffin and the expansion of the trucking industry and the interstate highway system. The Mississippi River's

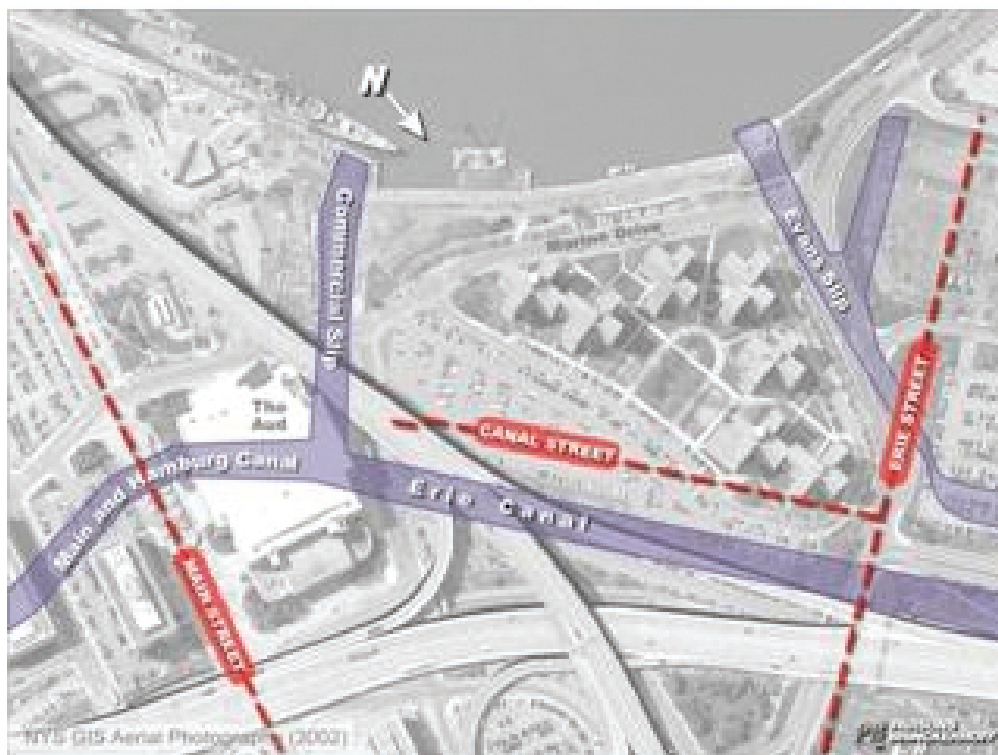


Figure 11, The Way We Were—the Canal District –then and now–note the infamous Canal Street (courtesy Empire State Development)

growing capacity as an outlet for mid west grain can't be ignored (see Henry Baxter's 1980 splendid paper on Buffalo and its grain elevators in References Cited).

The Canal District

Commercial Slip became the epicenter for the lightning swift growth of The Flats and Buffalo following Dewitt Clinton's inaugural journey. Warehouses, manufacturers, groceries, taverns, chandleries, restaurants, "theater/playhouses", dance halls, brothels, hotels, forwarding companies, lake steamship lines- ticket and company offices, and many other entrepreneurial businesses sprung up eager to serve not only the immigrants traveling west but also the lake sailors and canal boatmen with lively libidos, pockets full of cash and parched throats.

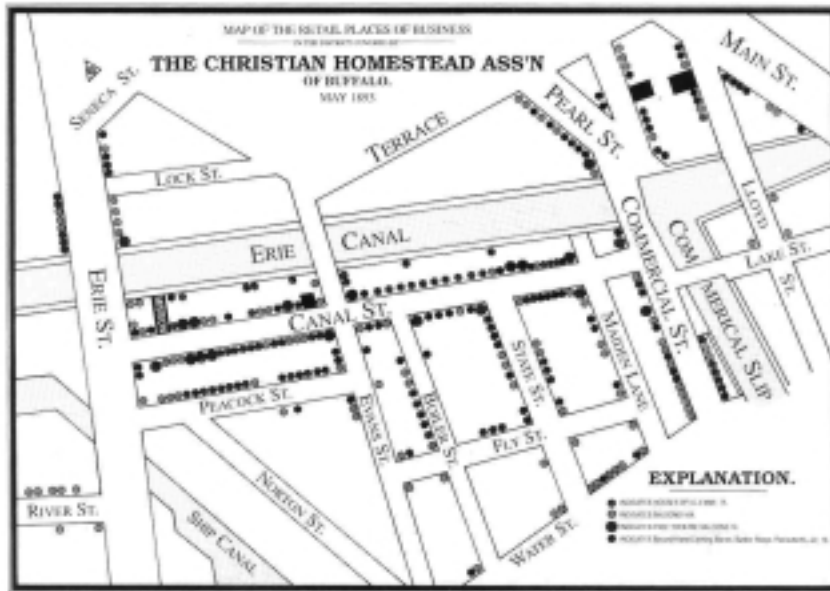


Figure 12, "Businesses" in the Canal District—relatively few of the circles represent legitimate enterprises (from Vogel, M.N. et al., 1993, *America's Crossroads, Buffalo's Canal Street/Dante Place, the Making of a City*. P. 178.

Within ten years of the opening of the canal The Canal District came of age with a reputation as infamous as any on the Barbary Coast which to some observers was a monastery by comparison. Joseph Dart's grain elevator, a pioneering effort in 1842, further added to the economic prosperity of the city but also expanded the congestion and sin in the Canal District. Although virtually every street in the district had its fair share of "sin bins" such as Commercial Street, Maiden Lane and Peacock Street-- Canal Street, just west of and parallel to the canal from Erie Street on the north to Commercial Street on the south, was ground zero-- "the strip", the street of inequity, where anything and everything could be had for the right price or less (Figure 11 and 12).

Meanwhile the Canal District continued to receive increased immigration, commerce, congestion, and squalid tenement buildings for the workers. Not surprisingly virulent outbreaks of cholera struck the district in the 1830's, 1840's and 1850's. In the 1830's cholera outbreak a "fallen woman", Lydia Harper from Rochester, offered her services as a nurse to bath, feed, and medicate the ill for no or very little pay.

Vice, thievery, prostitution, and murder flourished even during the dreaded outbreaks but certainly escalated between. The authorities and respectable society living on and inland of The Terrace (a social tectonic fault line) looked the other way and life on the wild side continued unabated. Fools and their money were quickly parted especially by non locals wanting to get out and "see the town", not a very noteworthy venture especially if the town is seen through the bottom of a shot glass. In 1856 a well off farmer from Iowa awoke with a splitting headache in a brothel's empty room lighter by \$150.00 cash that was formerly in his pocket not to mention the other 100.00 or more dollars he spent the night before on "wine, women, and song". For the average working man this handsome sum would have equaled the better part of a whole year's earnings if not the whole bit. On the long rail journey back home one can only presume that the "old gentleman" was quite occupied concocting one or more creative explanations for his family and friends to explain where the money went (Figure 12).

Patrons of the *Only Theater*, at Commercial and Canal Streets, apparently were a highly satisfied and contented lot especially after the girls would sit down on the their laps, and pull up their "Mother Hubbards" (kimono-like dresses) so their bare posteriors would be near the customer's masculine appurtenance - certainly for many a highly entertaining if not stimulating experience. The *Olympic Theater* on Erie Street was another story because it was a bit more sedate-- the girls would merely raise their dresses up to their upper thighs to put the money in their stocking tops after customers bought them a drink (Vogel et al., 1993 p141-quoting notes from an interview conducted by Marvin Rapp in 1946).

By the late 19th century and turn of the 20th century the district began to change; in part because the railroads had come and altered the business equation and in part because of the arrival of Italian immigrants, mostly Sicilians but also including Neapolitans and Calabrians. The Infested District gradually changed to **Little Italy** and although many filthy over crowded tenements still existed and some



unseemly aspects of the old canal days remained, the hard working, but very poor immigrants altered the social landscape, eventually for the better—a neighborhood began to take root.

In 1891 St. Anthony's Church opened on Court Street and Elmwood Avenue behind today's City Hall not far from Little Italy to serve the growing Italian Community and in 1906 Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church and parochial school opened in the heart of the canal district on the corner of LeCouteulx and Fly Streets. It was torn down in 1949. Strangely enough the first priest of the poor Italian parish was an Irishman the Rev. J. J. McMahon. The diocesan's serious oversight was finally corrected when the Rev. Joseph Gambino arrived to oversee his flock on 5 August 1910. That the wind of change was making its presence felt was perhaps best illustrated when colorful Canal Street's name was changed to Dante Place on 6 June 1909 (Figure 13).

Figure 13, Buffalo Inner Harbor and Canal District-Little Italy 1924- looking south. Old Erie Canal-lower left hand corner, Evans Ship Canal lower center, bow of turning passenger vessel pointing to Commercial Slip, Buffalo Creek just right of center and City Ship Canal right of that, Lake Erie far right. Canal Street immediately right of Old Erie Canal, our Lady of Mount Carmel Church 2 blocks south (above) the large grain elevator in lowest left portion of image on Evans Ship Canal (www.buffalonian.com)

The beginning of the end came to the canal district on a crisp New Year's Day morning in 1936. Joseph Lopresti, age 66, at 40 LeCouteulx just across the street from Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church came home from Mass, lit a candle, and went into his tenement basement to get some wine. He never made it to the barrel! In a sad twist of fate LoPresti unknowingly walked into a cellar filled with natural gas that had leaked into it the night before. The force of the explosion, for a split second, lifted the entire tenement off its foundation and then it collapsed with a horrible, sickening sound and a shower of bricks, broken glass, and splinters of wood. Five people died in the blast - Lopresti and his wife, and Thomas and Mary Scorsone along with their eldest child Anna, aged 12. Several were injured. The



Figure 14, Site of Lopresti Tenement
after the New Years Day 1936 explosion
(www.wnyheritagepress.org)

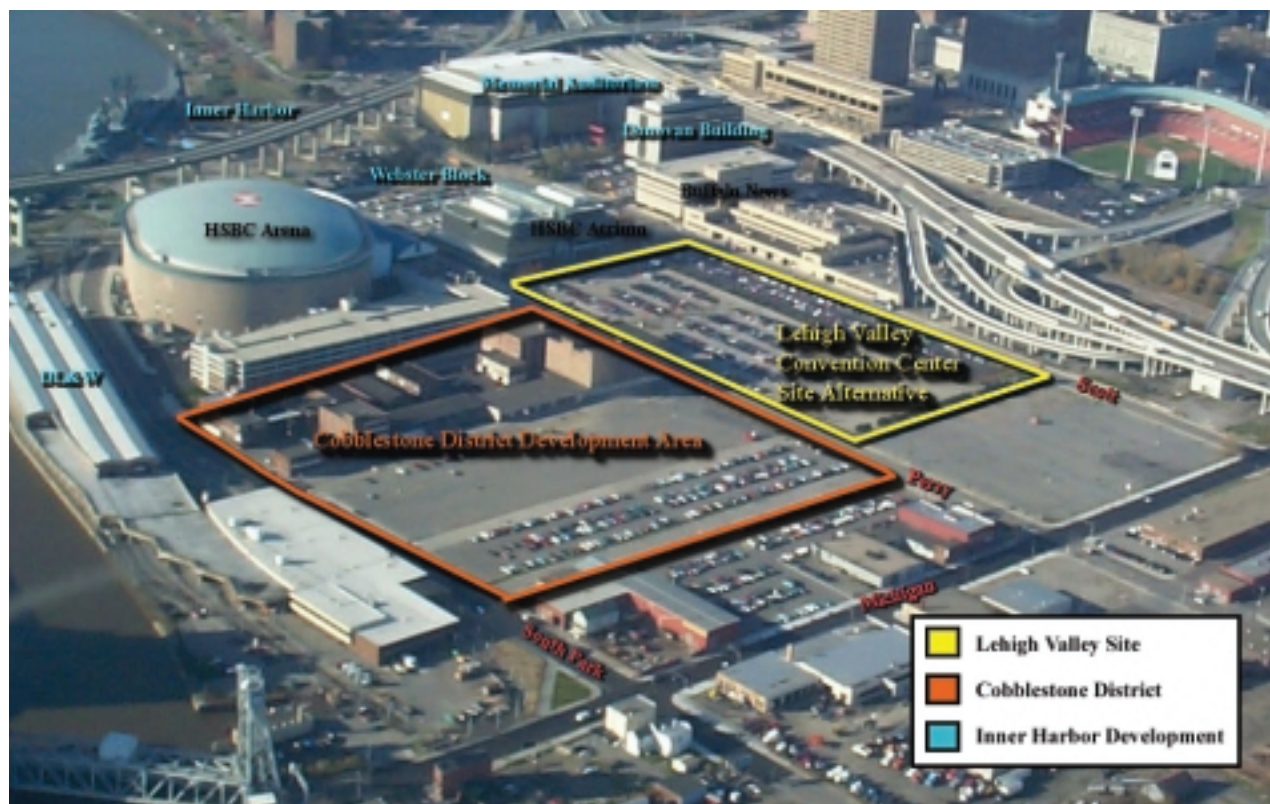
explosion shattered window panes three blocks away and the sound was heard over a mile away. That explosion destroyed far more than just one tenement building because it refocused attention on the squalid tenements and slums and for the entire canal district it was now only a matter of time. The storied district was about to fade into history eventually succumbing to slum clearance and urban renewal programs (Figure 14).

Memorial Auditorium, completed in 1940, rose on the very spot where Commercial Slip and the Erie Canal joined (Figure 15) and in the 1940's the wrecking ball converted the remainder of the district to heaps of rubble resembling the bombed cities of Europe. By 1952 it was all over and the Marine Apartments now stand on the space

once occupied by LeCouteulx, State, Maiden Lane, Fly and other streets of the district that once built the City of Buffalo. A short stretch of Commercial Street still survives and Perry Boulevard, beneath I-190, marks the canal alignment. Yet almost unnoticed east of and behind the cluster of tall apartment buildings there lingers a footprint of the fabled Canal Street/Dante Place. Now a mere parking lot, just west of I-190 (the old canal bed) this short piece of asphalt bears mute testimony to a sordid yet colorful past. If only it could speak!

Figure 15, Memorial Auditorium under construction late 1930's, Main St lower left and Terrace lower center
(www.wnyheritagepress.org)





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Websites:

www.buffaloresearch.com/maps.html
www.buffalonian.com
www.buffalohistoryworks.com
www.wnyheritagepress.org

Figure 16, Recent View of Buffalo Waterfront, High rise apartments in upper left mark site of Canal District, Main and Hamburg Canal beneath Buffalo News and elevated I-190, Clarke and Skinner Canal beneath street that is immediately right of the orange colored title Cobblestone District Development Area